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Rivalry, Rejection, and Recovery: Variations of the Cinderella Story

Amid the popularity of *Cinderella* as a classic fairy tale, and the scholarly discussion of origins, influence, dispersion, and significance, little attention has been paid to the fact that there are many modern stories for children which are, in their own ways, versions of *Cinderella,* changed for modern times.

The folklorists' discussion of *Cinderella* tells us that the story was first recorded in China in the ninth century A.D., and since then found among the Eskimo peoples and South American Indians and wherever European culture has penetrated—for example, Yolen (1977, p. 22). Nelson (1972, pp. 181–217) provides a collection of *Cinderellas* from France, Germany, Zuni Indians, ancient Egypt, China, Xhosa Africans, and elsewhere. We are familiar with mythographers hinting at the ritual fertility sources of *Cinderella,* such as Graves (1961, p. 323).

We are also familiar with psychoanalytic discussion of Cinderella's sibling rivalry and the attendant fear of parental rejection. Bettelheim (1976, pp. 236–277), for example, offers an exhaustive treatment of motifs and interpretation. The Cinderella story has also been seen, in relation to older children, as a symbolic account of the onset of sexual maturity, the rejection of a child's image of the mother, and the replacement of the father figure by lover.

We have been warned about misinterpreting *Cinderella* as a story of rags to riches, or wish-fulfillment by magic, when it is actually a story of "Trial, Recognition and Judgement" (Cook, 1969, p. 105),

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or of "riches recovered . . . rich girl (or princess) rescued from improper or wicked enslavement . . . shrewd and practical girl persevering and winning a share of the power" (Yolen, 1977, p. 21). We have been lectured on the diminishing and debasement of a sturdy fairy tale heroine into a prettified, oversentimentalized, weak creature wholly dependent on the magic of a fairy godmother, with no scrap of resource or character (Cook, 1969, pp. 105–109; Yolen, 1977, pp. 21–27).

All of this is well known. Yet discussion of children's literature tends to overlook the many examples which are not just retellings of one folk version of *Cinderella* or other, but which are books built on a *Cinderella* pattern. This is particularly surprising considering the critical and popular acclaim given to writers who have used, or "retold" myths in modern settings or in new guises, or as Garner (1970, p. 69) describes it, have "transmitted" the old myths. This includes authors such as Alan Garner himself, Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper, Penelope Lively, C. S. Lewis, Penelope Farmer, William Mayne, and many others. But little attention has been given to recent books that are "transmissions" of *Cinderella,* or of other traditional fairy tales (for example, consider "The Princess and the Pea" in Gardham's *Bilgewater,* 1976, Chapter 20).

Rosemary Threadgold (1979, p. 114) has pointed out that Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) is a *Cinderella* story, in fact two *Cinderella* stories in one, where Mary is one Cinderella and Colin is another (Yolen notes that in some folk versions of *Cinderella* the character is a boy). Indeed Burnett admitted that, when she was a child, *Cinderella* had been her favorite story, and her own life was itself a kind of *Cinderella* story (discussed by Marian E. Brown, 1988, pp. 199–200).

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*

It is not surprising then that other books by Burnett are *Cinderella* stories. Sara Crewe, the heroine of *A Little Princess* (1905) and Cedric Errol, the young hero of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885), are both Cinderella figures, in different ways. Sara's story is more obviously a version of *Cinderella.* When her father dies, she is banished from a position of wealthy privilege to the kitchen to do the menial work of the classic Cinderella. She must struggle to maintain her strength of character against the spiteful and malicious behavior of Miss Minchen, a striking step-mother figure. At the end, although there is no royal ball or Prince Charming, there is the restoration of riches, the recognition of noble character, and the acceptance back into her proper society which match the traditional conclusion of a *Cinderella* story.

The use of *Cinderella* motifs in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* tends to be

Burnett, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*

more concealed. It appears to be a story of "rags-to-riches," which would be an incomplete version of the traditional riches-to-rags-to-riches. Similarly it appears that the little lord does not have to do anything to gain the riches except be the blood heir.

In fact, before the real story begins, there has already been the loss of riches which is the starting point of any *Cinderella* story—this is the disinheriting of Cedric's father. Similarly, a Cinderella story should have more than just the restoration of riches as its resolution. There should also be judgment and trial, sometimes exemplified by the period of hard, undeserved work the Cinderella figure must undergo. In Cedric's case, this comes after the bestowal of the riches and includes the testing of character as he encounters his curmudgeonly grandfather, works to improve the conditions of the tenants, and eventually wins his grandfather's approval of his American mother.

Implicitly, what is occurring here is the "restoration" of Cedric's father (or his memory) back into the folds of family—a *Cinderella* happy ending carried over into the next generation after the death of a Cinderella-parent.

Burnett has received a considerable amount of critical attention, and the *Cinderella* links have been easy to establish. But other writers have not been so easily recognized as transmitting Cinderella into modern settings and guises. For example, Rudyard Kipling's unjustly overlooked *Captains Courageous* is an outstanding *Cinderella* story, an exact counterpart (with a boy-Cinderella) to Burnett's *Little Princess*.

Rudyard Kipling, *Captains Courageous*

Rich, spoiled, swaggering Harvey Cheyne, son of a millionaire, is effectively, although not literally, "orphaned" twice over. Initially this occurs because his mother spoils him so much that he becomes an unlovable child, and his father not only loses all patience with him but is too busy to be bothered. This separation from parents and riches is then reinforced, not by the death of a parent, as in the traditional story, but by falling overboard from an ocean liner and being rescued by some cod fishermen. They are simple, rough folk, who will not stand for any nonsense.

Like the traditional Cinderella, Harvey is forced to work hard for his living, and at first, much of the treatment of Harvey seems unkind. But it is actually his parents who had been unkind. Only now does Harvey have a chance to make himself into a decent, hard-working, caring adult—which is the fundamental Cinderella task. In a totally realistic story, there is also a fairy-godmother-like figure, the black cook, with second sight, who predicts the eventual

relationship between Harvey and Dan, the son of the fishing schooner's captain.

Edith Nesbit, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* and *The Railway Children*

Edith Nesbit's *Story of the Treasure Seekers* and *The Railway Children* are both *Cinderella* stories. Of course, they omit any real servitude for the children, but with the loss of family fortune—and, in *The Railway Children,* the imprisonment of the innocent father—the families undergo a typical Cinderella catastrophe. The children must work to regain what has been lost, while also learning what good things they still possess, and what they must do in order to grow up as decent people.

A naive view of fairy tales might suggest that *Cinderella* would be a popular narrative model during the nineteenth century, when didactic children's books and moral improvement were the norm. But hard-headed antiheroic realism in the latter part of the twentieth century might well banish Cinderella from "transmitting" fiction in Garner's sense, leaving only the traditional retellings and debasements such as the Disney cartoon version. However, this is not so. There are many examples of recent children's books which use the structure and motifs of *Cinderella,* sometimes in surprisingly novel ways.

In the most general form being discussed here, *Cinderella* is not a story of rags-to-riches but of "reversal of fortune" (Buchan, 1931, p. 223): disaster-tribulation-victory-restoration, with the disaster occurring in a family, the tribulation being a testing and maturing of character of the Cinderella figure, and the possible presence of fairy godmother figures.

Russell Hoban, *The Mouse and His Child*

Perhaps one of the most outstanding modern *Cinderella* stories is Russell Hoban's *Mouse and His Child.* The mouse child's vision of a happy family, which begins in the toy shop, is shattered when the clockwork father mouse and child are broken and thrown on the rubbish dump. From there, through the cinders and wilderness, they wander on a quest, struggling to survive, hoping to become self-winding and to regain the lost "family." The human tramp who appears mysteriously through the book is a kind of fairy godmother, although *The Mouse and His Child* should not be considered only a *Cinderella* story. There is much more going on than the simple reversal of fortune. Satire of modern art, questions about the purpose of life, the Egyptian myth of Sirius the Dog Star, ethological theories of territory, and an exploration of themes of power, revenge, and relationships are just some of the richness of this highly original book.

If *The Mouse and His Child* is a Cinderella story, where are the ugly

step sisters, the ball, the prince, and so on? The point is that, to see the *Cinderella* essence, we do not need to have these incidental trappings known to us through Perrault and Grimm. Loss of "fortune," struggle to survive, and eventual victory and restitution—these are the heart of *Cinderella,* although even this, as narrative, can be interpreted in different ways in terms of psychological development.

According to Bruno Bettelheim (1976), one psychological interpretation of *Cinderella* is sibling rivalry, that is, Cinderella coping with her jealousy of her (step) sisters and their jealousy of her. Yet this sibling rivalry "has only incidentally to do with a child's actual brothers and sisters. The real source of it is the child's feelings about his parents" (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 238). What is at stake is that "the child fears that . . . he is thought little of by his parents, or feels rejected by them," either absolutely, or in comparison with his siblings. If rejection by family, testing of character, and eventual restoration of family is a more generalized version of a *Cinderella* narrative, then all the traditional trappings (pumpkins, balls, magic, fairy godmothers, etc.) are not necessary parts of nontraditional versions.

Ruth M. Arthur, *The Whistling Boy*

Another modern *Cinderella* version is Ruth M. Arthur's *Whistling Boy.* Teenage Kirsty hates her young and pretty step mother, Lois. Her father remarried just a year after her real mother died of a heart attack. Her twin brothers seem not at all put out about the second marriage. Kirsty explains to herself, "I was the odd one out, my father had Lois, the twins had each other, and I—had no one" (p. 30).

Fortunately the sympathetic housekeeper, the fairy godmother figure, suggests that Kirsty go for a working summer holiday to her sister's, near Norfolk, on the English coast. There she meets another Cinderella figure, Jake, the son of a cold, rejecting mother who thinks Jake may be mentally ill. All of these subplots (including one about a friend, Dinah, a third Cinderella figure who suffers rejection at the hands of an alcoholic mother) are brought to their respective climaxes and happy endings, including the laying of an unhappy ghost from many years before, the Whistling Boy of the title. But it is not achieved easily. As with the traditional *Cinderella,* hard work must be done, risks taken, anguish and strong emotions suffered, characters developed. Even at the end, there still remains the haunting by the unquiet sea where the Whistling Boy drowned himself.

In real life there are no supernatural fairy godmothers, and no magic to make people love each other. What had often been left as

symbolic in the traditional fairytale may become explicitly handled in modern transmissions. In the traditional version, the death of a parent can stand as explicit rejection, and also as a symbol of other kinds of rejection or change. A modern twist may replace the traditional death of a parent with the breakup of a marriage, divorce, and possibly remarriage as the source of pain and rejection. This can be compounded for adolescent characters by the development of sexual awareness, in which feelings of sexual attraction are complicated by patterns of affection within a family.

Judy Blume, *It's Not the End of the World*

Judy Blume's *It's Not the End of the World* can be taken as a straightforward treatment of a child's response to divorce which is amenable to a *Cinderella* interpretation. When Karen's parents fight, divorce, and then begin to seek new partners, Karen is angry, upset, and confused. The closest thing to a fairy godperson is the reassurance Karen finds from a new friend, Val, who has already come to terms with her own parents' divorce, and who was herself helped by *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce.* Karen eventually realizes that, with a little grit and patience, it's not the end of the world, and there can be more B+ days after all—personal happiness can be regained after the massive disturbance to family life.

Christobel Mattingley, *Southerly Buster*

Christobel Mattingley, *New Patches for Old*

If it is not the death of the parent, or divorce and remarriage, the disaster which plummets a modern Cinderella from an initially happy life into the troubled time of trial can be something like finding that your mother, in her late thirties, is pregnant. For teenage girls, themselves just beginning to recognize their own sexuality, such discovery of their parents' sexuality can be profoundly disturbing. This is what happens in Christobel Mattingley's *Southerly Buster.* Similarly, an outline of a *Cinderella* story underlies Mattingley's earlier teenage novel *New Patches for Old,* about a family migrating from Britain to Australia. Both contain several fairy godmother figures whose kindness and advice help the central character resist despair courageously and grow. Both involve an eventual reconciliation between teenager and parents, as the teenager grows toward personal maturity. And both conclude by establishing a relationship with a Prince Charming figure. The Oedipal (or Electral) attraction the child feels for the adult parent changes into a potentially sexual, more mature relationship outside the family, and the child-parent relationship matures into a nonsexual relationship between adults—another fundamental *Cinderella* task.

C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*

Rivalry between siblings or step siblings is a traditional *Cinderella* element. It occurs in the myth of Eros and Psyche, which was given originally in Apuleus' *Golden Ass* and retold powerfully by C. S. Lewis in *Till We Have Faces* (1956). Lewis's version is told by the jealous ugly sister, Orual. She blames the gods for her ugliness and

Psyche's beauty, resenting what she feels is the gods' rejection of her when she was born. The jealousy of Psyche's sister causes a disaster for Psyche, which can only be overcome by her persistence and goodness of character. Interestingly Orual is also redeemed, by her efforts to help Psyche, and finally by recognizing the profound ways in which she and Psyche resemble each other—Cinderella and step sister alike.

Margaret Mahy, *The Changeover*

Much more recently two stories by Margaret Mahy have used parts of the Cinderella structure, with some interesting twists. In *The Changeover,* Laura Chant is struggling to come to terms with several ordinary painful matters. Her father has left, divorced, and married again and will soon have another child. Her mother is becoming interested in another man. Laura is becoming aware of her own sexual needs as well as those of other people. All of this might be the stuff of soap operas, except that Laura has the potential to be initiated as a witch, and she needs to do this to rescue her younger brother from the devouring spiritual clutches of a wicked character. Part of the initiation involves an emotional and sexual confrontation with a teenage boy, already a witch, himself a Cinderella figure abandoned at birth by his witch mother.

By the end Laura forgives her father for having left:

> as if he had cut himself entirely out of her life and taken part of her with him. It no longer seemed to matter that he had loved someone else more than he had loved her or loved Kate [her mother] . . . she had begun to recover from a secret illness no one had ever completely recognized or been able to cure. (p. 179)

A "secret illness" is a vivid image for the plight of a Cinderella struggling to survive and regain or find anew what has been disastrously lost.

Margaret Mahy, *The Catalogue of the Universe*

With *The Catalogue of the Universe,* Mahy totally dispenses with any overt supernatural or fantasy elements, while at the same time maintaining a richness of language and imagery which has few equals. The *Cinderella* features are clear, although, as in *Little Lord Fauntleroy,* they span more than one generation. Angela May, on the brink between school and tertiary study, is the fatherless child of Dido May. The Cinderella disaster which has engulfed Dido and Angela is precisely that Dido is a single parent, struggling to keep herself and her daughter. Although Angela has not directly suffered a loss of "fortune," she has grown up with an unrelenting awareness of loss, knowing that she has no father, that things might have been otherwise.

Around this disaster, Dido has spun a romantic tale of the hopeless

love between herself and a handsome married man and her decision to have his child even though they could never be married. Now that Angela is old enough to act independently, she dreams romantically of finding her father and making things come right. But Dido's story turns out to be a "fairy tale," invented to comfort herself as much as her daughter. By the time the father is found and confronted, a romantic happy ending is not possible: Dido has "grown to love solitude more than almost anything" (p. 177). Angela's dreams of romantic happy endings for her mother and finding a handsome Prince Charming for herself come unstuck. Starry-eyed romance is rejected in favor of a clear-eyed love for the clever, serious, but not-so-handsome boy Tycho, who is less a heart-throb lover and more a reliable, close, and, ultimately, intimate friend. It is a Cinderella story that rewrites the sentimental trappings of soap opera romance and substitutes an insight into character and relationships, achieving a realistic modern view of love.

From clockwork toys to parents dying, divorcing, and remarrying, from Cinderellas who regain a new version of their old life to Cinderellas who merely survive or even lose, the archetypal psychological elements of *Cinderella* still spring up in a variety of modern settings and treatments.

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